RITES OF PASSAGE, OLD AND NEW: THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS INITIATION CEREMONIES AND THE MODERN EDUCATION SYSTEM, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ABAGUSII COMMUNITY OF SOUTH-WESTERN KENYA.

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Introduction

In many communities in Kenya, as elsewhere in East Africa and the world in general, socialization practices associated with transition from childhood to adulthood are often marked by elaborate rites of passage. Through these rites, an individual earns his/her social identity in the community. This identity is important because certain social roles perceived vital in society require that a person possess some specific identity as a qualification before the individual can be permitted to perform them. And once this qualification has been obtained, the individual is compelled by a set of strict social sanctions to perform these roles.

Many of these rites of passage take the form of initiation ceremonies. The most important being that of circumcision for boys and clitoridectomy for girls. For societies that perform these rites, the transition from childhood to adulthood takes place around the adolescent stage. During this period temporary institutions for indigenous formal teaching may be elected. A period of seclusion is set aside for the purpose and learning and instructions take the form of an intensive course, with certain specific members of society assigned positions as authorised “teachers” to teach the initiates this intensive course. The instructions (curriculum) consist, among other things, of the revelation of the mysteries of adult life that the initiates are soon about to enter.

In recent years, there has been an outcry as to the usefulness of such practice in the present world community whose technological advancement seems to have rendered such practice obsolete. The outcry is particularly loudest as regards the practice of clitoridectomy among the females, with women’s liberation movements leading the fight and calling the whole exercise “genital mutilation” and insisting that the exercise is a violation of the individual’s right to freedom and privacy. They argue that the educational values and the social identity such practice is purported to bestow upon the individual are no longer relevant or useful in a world community that has become a small global village where the individual is inevitably interacting with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

This fight for the abolition of these rites of passage may be understandable, especially when those advocating for the abolition may themselves be innocent of the role such rites continue to play in transmitting
important values of identity that are necessary for the well-being of the individual. Modern formal schooling does not transmit such values. Indeed, modern formal education has not succeeded to inculcate in the learner such vital values as a strong sense of social identity and how this identity influences the role the individual plays as a useful member of the society. In fact, nowhere in the modern school system is there a conscious and deliberate effort to take the learner through a specified period of transition marking a watershed between childhood and adulthood. Result? The youths now graduating from modern formal institutions of education do not even know themselves, who they are, where they are coming from and where they are going, what is expected of them and how they are supposed to relate to the social environment around them. Yet, this is the gap that the rites of passage cater for so well.

In this paper an attempt is made to show:

(a) Why such rites of passage are performed, and how they are used to enable the individual to acquire a specific social identity so vital for the performance of specific roles as a member of the community.

(b) Why such identity is attracting controversy in modern societies, particularly as regards the socio-cultural and educational value in the practice of cliteridectomy among the females.

(c) How the controversy could be solved by identifying the educational role such rites of passage are meant to perform.

In order to achieve (a), (b) and (c) above, an examination of the philosophy behind the practice of these rites of passage among the Abagusii community is made. This community is only one example of the many communities that perform such rites of passage.

Why Initiation?

The purpose of initiation among the Abagusii community is best captured by Mircea Eliade’s concept of initiation in general:

The term initiation in the most general sense denotes a body of rites and oral teaching whose purpose is to produce a decisive alteration in the religious and social status of the person to be initiated. In philosophical terms, initiation is equivalent to a basic change in existential condition; the novice emerges from his ordeals endowed with a totally different being from that which he possessed; he has become another. Among the various categories of initiation, puberty initiation is particularly important. These transition rites are obligatory for all the youth of the tribe. To gain the right to be admitted among adults the adolescent has to pass a series of initiatory ordeals; it is by virtue of these rites, and by the revelations that they entail, that he will be recognised as a responsible member of the society. Initiation introduces the candidate into the human community and into the world of spiritual and cultural values. He learns not only the behaviour patterns, the techniques and the institutions of adults but also the sacred myths and traditions of the tribe, the names of the gods and the history of their works; above all he learns the mystical relations between the tribe and the Supernatural Beings as those relations were established at the beginning of Time.¹

As has already been mentioned above, many societies in the world use one form
of initiation or another to admit their youths into adulthood, circumcision of the boys and clitoridectomy of the girls being the ones used most. Other forms used include the removal of teeth, mutilation of certain parts of the body e.g. fingers, decoration of the face with permanent scratches, tattooing of the stomach and the arms and many others. The reasons for doing all this are many and they include those highlighted in Arnold van Gennep's attempt at explaining the intention of initiation ceremonies for the boys:

The intention of all that is done at this ceremony is to make momentous change in the boy's life: the past is to be cut off from him by a gulf which he can never re-pass. His connection with his mother as her child is broken off, and he becomes henceforth attached to the men. All the sports and games of his boyhood are to be abandoned with the severance of the old domestic ties between himself and his mother and sisters. He is now to be a man, instructed in and sensible of the duties which devolve upon him as a member of the community.

The purpose of initiation ceremonies among the Abagusii community is exactly the same as that which has been given above. Needless to say, the entire initiation process constitutes a very important part of the Abagusii traditional education. Both the initiation of the boys and the girls meet the educational purpose as described above. The purpose, as can be clearly seen, is to introduce the candidate into the human community through rites and revelations that enables him/her to be recognised as a responsible member of the society by giving him/her a specific social identity.

The whole idea is to create a permanent mark on the body of an individual which, as we shall soon see, is intended to modify his/her personality to meet the requirements of the group to which he/she is about to be admitted. The permanent mark on the body of the individual serves as a valid stamp that is put on the certificate of entry into the new group. It shows that the individual has gone through the necessary requirements or course of instructions that a person must possess before the he/she is admitted into the group. This is as it should be, for, as is always the case, each group has its own rules and norms that help to regulate the character and conduct of its members. Any new comer is not likely to know what is expected of him/her unless he/she undergoes some necessary instructions to initiate him/her to the new group.

Why the Painful Ordeals?

However, a number of questions concerning this system of introducing the candidate to the adult world may arise. Even if it is the case that, in order to gain the right to be admitted among adults, the adolescent has to pass through a series of initiatory rituals, why must these initiatory rituals or rites of passage be such terrible ordeals? Why should there be so much pain? Is there no other alternative way to introduce the candidate into the adult world? Why must the initiate pay so dearly to gain entry into the adult status? Why must he/she shed blood? Among the Abagusii the poor boy is tortured from the night before circumcision down to the last night of his seclusion period. What justifies all this?

(a) The Concept of death and rebirth

First there is the awareness by the adult world that the candidate to be initiated into their group is in all manner of likeness impure, and, therefore, unfit, in his/her state, to be admitted into their status. In
order to purify him/her and make him/her fit to join them, the adult world decides to destroy him/her to bring as it were, an initiatory death to him/her, to dismantle his/her old personality into its original components. Then they reconstruct him/her afresh, a process of ritual initiatory resurrection, which takes place throughout the seclusion period. They mould the initiate the way they would like him/her to be, the personality they would like the initiate to have when he/she joins their group. They, therefore, decide to dismantle him/her through an initiatory death, and then mould him/her according to their taste. The old personality must therefore momentarily die in order to obtain from it new material for the construction of a new and acceptable personality. But death, as we all know, is painful. This is why pain is a major characteristic of the majority of the rites of passage. The death of the old personality must occur if the resurrection of the new personality is to take place. Here, too, we agree with Eliade when he sees the initiatory ordeals as implying death and rebirth.

The majority of initiatory ordeals more or less clearly implies a ritual death followed by resurrection or a new birth. The central moment of every initiation is represented by the ceremony symbolizing the death of the novice and the return to the fellowship of the living. But he returns to life a new man, assuming another mode of being. Initiatory death signifies the end at once of childhood, of ignorance, and of the profane condition.²

(b) The Concept of a Covenant
The shedding of blood may be seen as a solemn promise to abide by the laws of adulthood. The initiate has promised to abide by, and live according to, the 'law', and the only sure way to show his sincerity is to take a solemn oath by shedding his most precious property – the blood. By shedding blood, he promises to follow the tribe’s traditions, to defend the tribe and to serve it. The blood unites him with the tribe. That is why, as we saw earlier, the circumciser does continue with the same knife and cut the foreskins of all the boys present, without washing it after every other boy. The idea is to let the blood of all the boys mix on that “holy ground”, uniting them in a permanent bond. The boys are no longer different. The knife of the circumciser bears witness and conveys to all of them a contagion of a shared enterprise in which all are united by a common goal.

Why attack the Genitals?
For the time being, let it be granted that the reasons given above justify the use of pain as a major characteristic of initiation. A nagging question still remains: Why should the genitals be the targets for attack? Why does the Abagusii community, or any other community for that matter, have to apply pain on the genitals? Why could it not be done on any other part of the body?

It was mentioned above that initiation has to be painful because a person has to undergo an initiatory death in order to resurrect as a new being. There is, as can be seen, the concept of death and rebirth. But death cannot be achieved unless the organs that help to generate life are destroyed. Since the genitals are used as a means for perpetuating life, they should be the targets of attack if complete destruction and death is to be achieved. Circumcision of the boys or the clitoridectomy of the girls may then be viewed as a way of bringing about this momentous death and, thereafter, the resurrection of the organs back to life but in a new form. This is clearly expressed in the circumcision song (esimbore) when the initiates are brought home from the
The team of men that escorts the initiates sing to the effect that the sexual organs that once belonged to the initiates have been taken by the circumciser (are dead) and the new ones have now been born. 4

The whole ritual exercise of death and rebirth does not end there, though. It is performed again during the mysteries of esibo night, when the initiate’s organ is bitten by a ‘snake’, or when the entire body of the initiate is supposed to be swallowed by a ‘monster’ (enyabubu), a mythical fierce creature believed to live in the depths of the nearby Lake Victoria and which occasionally emerges from the depths at night to snatch humans and their livestock and swallow them.

The idea is to dramatize the death. The circumciser has to be seen as a wild beast that snaps away the initiate’s organ of life. That is why, as we have seen in the esimbore song, the circumciser is referred to as samokami, a fierce beast. That is why the youth who ‘bites’ the initiate with the leaves of the poisonous and extremely painful ‘rise’ plant (pouzolzia parasitica) is called the ‘snake’. That is why the girls who scratch the girl novice with the thorny branches of omotembe plant (erythrina abyssinica) deck themselves in leaves and appear like the wild animals. The human actors assume the position of wild beasts and attack the initiate’s genitals which are the basis of his/her life and ensure the complete death of the novice’s childhood.

But why do the human actors take the form of wild animals? Why do they have to assume the role of fierce animals? The answer, seemingly, lies in the fact that humans have always regarded wild animals as posing an immediate threat to their lives. These happen to be the ones they fear most in their immediate environment. Throughout history, humans have been watching the ruthlessness with which wild animals attack and kill fellow human beings. The initiate has, therefore, to be killed by the killer he knows and fears most. Monsters are regarded as the most ruthless killers and that is why the masters of initiation have to pose and act as those monsters to ascertain the ritual death of the initiate’s childhood.

In Gusii, the snake is one of the creatures dreaded most, so one of the masters of the ceremony poses as a snake and ‘bites’ the initiate in one of those many rituals they perform. The monster, enyabubububu, as has been seen above, is used for the same reason. Nor are the Abagusii people the only ones who characterize this initiatory death with the creatures they fear most. The Maasai people dread the lion as the greatest enemy since it attacks and kills both them and their livestock. During circumcision, therefore, the Maasai circumciser poses as a lion who attacks the genitals of the initiate and causes the initiatory death. The same rituals are performed during the Nandi and the Abaluhya circumcision ceremonies.

In fact, the choice of what animal each society uses to bring about the initiatory death of the novice depends very much on what animal that particular society holds as the fiercest and most dreaded. In Africa where the lion and the leopard stand out as the fiercest, they feature as the initiatory animals used by most communities to cause the death of the novice during initiation ceremonies. In South America it is the jaguar. In Oceania it is the crocodile and other marine monsters. 5 In short, the initiatory death must be caused by the animal which the initiate knows to be the most dreaded. The circumciser must, therefore, pose as that animal and destroy the childhood of the initiate the way that animal destroys its prey. This way
the initiatory death is ascertained, particularly when the ‘animal’ mercilessly attacks the very organs that make life possible - the initiate’s genitals.

Briefly then, the genitals are attacked because they are seen as the generative life force of the initiate. To ensure complete initiatory death of the novice, the organs that are responsible for procreation must be the targets of attack. Further, to ensure that death is achieved, the attacker must be the killer animal known to be the fiercest and most feared by the people in that particular locality.

(c) The Idea of Value

It is generally accepted that a person is likely to value more highly anything that he struggles to achieve than something he exerts no effort to obtain. Once a person has achieved something after so much struggle and suffering, he then values it highly and can guard it with unending vigilance. One is tempted to believe that this is one of the reasons why, after so much mental torture, most professionals today jealously guard their professions with unfaltering tenacity. Be that as it may, much value is attached to anything that is won after exerting so much effort and suffering to achieve it.

Adulthood and all the mysteries that it unfolds are no exception. If it has to be valued, those who seek to acquire it must suffer for it. If it simply dropped like manna from heaven above, its value would hardly be seen, leave alone the need to cherish it once it has been achieved. So, the rites of passage aim at creating this value. The purpose of torturing the adolescent boy during initiation ceremonies then could be seen as an attempt to increase the value attached to adulthood, to make the boy feel that what he is seeking is something so hard to get. After he has attained it through suffering the young man would want to look back and marvel at the feat of his achievement. In short, the adult world characterizes initiation with pain to increase the value of adulthood and all the knowledge of the mysteries it entails.

(d) Could the Adult World Be Jealous?

Another reason for the application of pain could possibly be jealousy on the part of the adult world. The adults may unconsciously nurse feelings of jealousy due to the fear of competition. The candidate wishing to be initiated will soon join them and, therefore, share with them all that which they regard as their rightful monopoly. The pain which they inflict on the intending newcomer is, therefore, an expression of their, perhaps, unconscious resistance to sharing some of the comforts of adulthood with him. The inflicting of pain may then be interpreted as giving vent to an expression of their hidden natural selfish impulse to keep for themselves the mysteries of adult life.

Man, as the warning always goes, is selfish. Although Rousseau defends him that he is naturally good if society does not corrupt him, experience shows that Hobbes is right when he warns that man, left to his natural state, is selfish and would not like to share things with his fellow men. When his selfishness is threatened, as in this case now, where the newcomer threatens to share with him some of the fruits of adulthood, man has to react violently to defend it. This reaction may be expressed in many ways, as the science of psychology tells us, and jealousy is one of them. This jealousy may be mildly expressed or it may be violently expressed in the form of the painful rites of passage we are here discussing.

The jealousy expressed in refusing to admit a newcomer into one’s own status is not
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confined to initiation rites only. It is clearly visible everywhere if one cares to look around. Only one example needs to be cited to illustrate the point: that of the notorious professionals. How often does one see deliberate efforts exerted to prevent, if not to slow down, the initiation into the profession of practicing doctors, architects, lawyers, teachers, accountants and technicians? There seems to exist an unconscious fear of rivalry, sugarcoated with the acceptable practice of making absolutely sure that the newcomer is truly qualified and ready to share the fame that is attached to the membership of that profession.

Professionals, therefore, jealously guard their professions and resist the initiation of new members. Although they do not practically apply any physical pain to those wishing to be initiated into the profession, no one would deny the mental torture in terms of many years of study accompanied by what are sometimes unnecessary written and practical examinations that are invented to keep down the number of many candidates that would otherwise like to join the profession. There may be no justifiable reasons for all this, other than that the 'adult' professionals perhaps jealously want to guard against the inevitable sharing of their fruits with what they regard as intruding 'adolescents'. To guard against what they perhaps wrongly regard as their rightful 'classified material', the 'adults' attempt to ward off the 'adolescents' from gaining access to it for fear of rivalry. To get the 'key' that unlocks the 'strong-room' of these classified material, these wonderful mysteries of their profession, the young 'adolescent' must not just walk in and obtain it in a silver platter. He must sweat for it, sweat for it in terms of long years of schooling and pass all those discouragingly difficult examinations before he can be allowed to gain that coveted professional identity.

Acceptability into professional status, therefore, hardly differs from initiation into adulthood through rites of passage.

Developing a Sense of Identity, Commitment, Co-operation, and Self-Reliance

(a) Lessons from the Concept of the Sacred Fire

The sacred fire is the most important activity that preoccupies the initiate throughout the seclusion period. It is so important that it involves the combined efforts of the omosegi (sponsor) and the initiate himself or herself. In modern educational theory and practice, omosegi is equivalent to the tutor who is assigned special duties to a particular student or group of students. The sacredness of the ritual fire centres on the fact that it is conceived of as symbolizing life itself and particularly the sexual life of the initiate. Now that he has been circumcised, the initiate has entered the sacred life of procreation, of giving forth to other lives, of perpetuating the human species.

The method of kindling this ritual fire clearly signifies its sexual element. The kindling results from friction caused by rubbing together two sticks (ebirende), one lying down horizontally on the ground and the other held between the palms and rubbed vertically on it. The one lying horizontally down on the ground is soft and is known as the female stick (ekerende egekungu). The other which is held vertically and rubbed against it is hard and is known as the male stick (ekei'cnde egetwoni). The two fire sticks are then conceived of as symbolizing a man and a woman. The act of rubbing the sticks together and the consequent friction which causes heat is conceived of as coitus between the man and the woman. The fire produced by the heat of friction is
conceived of as symbolizing the birth of the child whom the man and woman have got from their joint participation in sexual intercourse. The sacred fire, therefore, symbolizes the fertility of the initiate. If the fire goes out at any time during seclusion this is conceived of as the death of the initiate’s sexual life. The initiate, it is believed, will henceforth never beget children! That is why this sacred fire needs careful tending.

The task of tending the ritual fire, as has been mentioned already, is a shared responsibility between the initiate and his or her sponsor. To ensure the seriousness of this shared responsibility, social sanctions have been put in place to reinforce it. It is believed that if the sacred fire goes out, the supernatural punishment is meted out to both the initiate and the omosegi (sponsor). Both of them shall never beget children. The sponsor must, therefore, remain as vigilant as the initiate in the tending of the sacred fire, at least to safeguard his/her own future fertility interest.

Besides symbolizing the sexual duties which the initiate will have to perform, the sacred fire carries with it another more important educational value. It gives an opportunity to both the initiate and the sponsor to learn the value of cooperation in performing a task for mutual interest. Both of them acquire a shared experience in achieving a goal which they believe is beneficial to them both. They realize that they must work together with equal commitment if this goal is to be achieved. The sponsor, whose role in the whole enterprise of the rites of passage is that of a special tutor, recognizes the need to be in the same position as the learner. He gets completely involved in the learner’s (initiate’s) activity. Their interests are interwoven together. In the modern education system such teacher-learner relationship is sadly and conspicuously lacking.

(b) Lessons from the Concept of the Ritual Esuguta Grass

While the sacred fire symbolizes the sexual life of the initiate after seclusion, the esuguta grass symbolizes his/her physical well-being during the seclusion period, and thereafter in adulthood. If the grass is well watered, it will produce new shoots and remain green. This symbolizes the good physical health of the initiate. But if it withers, it symbolizes the ill health of the initiate. The initiate is made to believe that his health resembles that of his ritual grass. If he hopes to be physically healthy during and after seclusion, he should make his ritual grass healthy by tending it well and watering it regularly.

The esuguta grass also symbolizes another very important aspect of the initiates’ adult life. It symbolizes physical health which is brought about by the cultivation of crops. The novice is ritually introduced to the adult duty of raising crops. His or her physical health, together with the physical health of the family, will depend, among other things, on the successful growth of crops. The tending of the esuguta, therefore, is an introduction to this adult responsibility. The initiate symbolically demonstrates this responsibility by learning to tend the ritual grass in the house. The ritual song which the initiate sings whenever he is watering this esuguta grass clearly demonstrates the concept of agriculture as the main symbol of this ritual.7 The song explains how the tilling of land and the growing of crops can enable a person to win friendship even from strangers and unfriendly people. A person with plenty of food gets many people to visit him.
The Need for a Period of Seclusion

In order to facilitate proper performance of all these rituals of initiation, there must be separation of the initiate from the ordinary normal life. This is particularly true in the case of a boy initiate. There must be complete break from his parents on whom he has been depending until now. He has to be kept away from anything that reminds him of the world of childhood. Then he undergoes intensive and momentous transformation, both mentally and physically. Mentally he is made to forget his parents and all their benevolence. To achieve this, he is forbidden to call them by their names, or even to refer to them in any way. He is forbidden to meet or see them, or to come near their house.

To break away from his childhood where he has been mixing freely with the uncircumcised boys, he is forbidden to meet them and is instructed to shoot them with his blunt arrow whenever and wherever he finds them. This creates fears in the children and they try to avoid him, thereby reinforcing the creation of a social distance and an increasingly widening gap between them. Throughout the period of seclusion he is made to live a life totally different from that he lived prior to circumcision. He has to learn to be self-reliant for the provision of basic needs and never relies on being fed by his parents alone. He has to go to the bush and shoot down birds with his sharp arrow. He has to go to the river at dusk and fetch water for himself and for his ritual esuguta grass. He has to go to the bush and collect firewood for his ritual fire. All these facilities for the development of independence and self-reliance could not be possible without a period of seclusion. Nor could it be possible for him to learn to forget quickly the childish behavior he used to engage in at home, and the dependence on the parents for decision-making. He has to be separated so as to enable him begin to fend for himself and learn to make decisions.

Compare this with the modern boarding school system. No break from childhood. No opportunity for the development of self-reliance. No commitment on the part of teacher and learner to achieve a desired and focussed common goal. In short, no chance for the development of self identity.

Conclusion

As can be seen, what happens during initiation ceremonies is extremely important among the Abagusii community. It marks the turning point from childhood to adult life. As has been explained, what happens in the social life of an adult in that community depends largely on what happens during the initiation period. As was said at the beginning of the paper, initiation is the period when formal teaching actually takes place. This teaching takes the form of many ritual ceremonies, spreading over the entire period of the seclusion. All the formal teaching that takes place here has only one purpose – that of introducing the initiate into the adult life.

The ceremonies that are used to initiate the boys and the girls are similar in form but different in content. The difference is markedly clear in the way circumcision and clitoridectomy are conducted, and in their places of seclusion. This has been neatly summarized by LeVine.

The girl is accompanied to the genital operation place by her mother and secluded in her mother’s house; the boy is kept apart from his parents from the time of his leaving the house to be circumcised to the day of his emergence several weeks later. The girl is held down during the
genital operation, while the boy must stand to face the knife alone. The girl must be confined to her mother's house during seclusion; the boy's seclusion in a special hut involves going out to meet others for adventures in hunting and theft.⁹

In addition to the above differences, the boy is more tortured during seclusion. He is given very distasteful herbs to eat and bitten with biting poisonous branches of "rise" (*pouzolzia parasitica*). The whole purpose is to prepare him for the kind of tough adult duty he will soon assume, the duty that demands that he possesses the kind of personality appropriate to it. All that happens to him during initiation teaches him "to be self-reliant, to do without parental support, to endure unflinchingly, to cooperate with related agemates, and to venture forth with weapons."¹⁰

As for the girls, there is no need for such encouragement for self-reliance. Her duties will continue to confine her to her mother's house and will be under her supervision until she gets married. And after marriage she will continue to be under another person's custody (the husband), taking all instructions from him. So, there would be no reason to train her to be independent and self-reliant.

Although the *rites of passage* bestow upon her the status of an adult, a girl is really never considered an adult until she has been married, as she remains in the custody of her parents and never makes any independent decisions in anything before she consults them, especially the mother. But a boy, once initiated, lives in a separate house from that of his parents. From now onwards, he would be expected to behave independently like any adult. If he misbehaves, he never gets physical punishment from his parents. The physical punishment is replaced mainly by economic, social and supernatural sanctions.

But the girl continues to be directly responsible to her parents and physical punishment continues to be meted out if she misbehaves. The mother continues to polish her for her future married life. Most of the duties she now performs are those she is expected to perform in her own house after marriage which can take place any time after the seclusion period. Initiation for a girl, therefore, only prepares her for marriage and the sexual adult life. That is why all the ceremonies during the entire seclusion period are mostly characterized by sex education. From the day of clitoridectomy to the last day of seclusion, every single event that happens is related to sexual life. It may, therefore, be concluded that, while the boys' initiation ceremonies emphasize education for bravery and self-reliance, those of girls are aimed at giving detailed sex education meant to prepare them for marriage.

In summary, the significance of the *rites of passage* among the Abagusii falls into four categories. The ceremonies have:

(a) religious significance
(b) social significance
(c) political significance
(d) educational significance.

The religious significance is seen in the symbolic death and resurrection where the initiate dies by shedding blood, symbolically lives in the spirit form during seclusion period, and then resurrects from the dead as a *new entity*, completely changed in personality and is reunited to the world when he comes out of seclusion, but this time possessing a different *identity*. At the operation day the initiate's body of childhood dies, but the spirit lives on symbolized by seclusion from the living. Then the spirit changes back to the human
form, this time with the adult characteristics. It is this adult who joins the society after seclusion, ready and qualified for new roles as a full member of his society.

The social significance of initiation rites is to introduce the initiates to adult life: they are now allowed to share, as Mbiti puts it, “in the full privileges and duties of the community. They enter into the state of responsibility: they inherit new rights and new obligations are expected of them by society”. The rites prepare young people in matters connected with the adult sexual life, marriage, procreation and all family responsibilities.

The rites earn the initiate eligibility to engaging in political activities of the clan. He can now be entrusted with certain political duties, like attending the elders baraza and participating in the discussions. He can now represent his absent father in the discussions of matters affecting the clan and tribe. The fact that he is now eligible to marry and become head of a family enables him to assume the position of a leader from where he can climb up the ladder of leadership in the clan or tribe.

Among communities that circumcise their youth, the eligibility to engage in political activities through rites of passage is regarded as a very important achievement. Among the Abagusii community, this achievement is so coveted that it gives a very strong sense of pride to those who have successfully withstood the ordeals of circumcision ceremonies. No individual would be allowed to hold a position of leadership at any level if he/she has not been through the circumcision ceremonies. The community regards the individual as still belonging to the world of childhood and children are not allowed to lead. Indeed, a circumcised person is not even expected to engage in an argument with a non-circumcised one since this is viewed as allowing oneself to sink into the level of the childhood that one bravely abandoned at the altar of the circumciser.

This cultural belief, which is also held among the other circumcising communities in Kenya, that the initiated (circumcised) is the only one eligible to perform political roles and that the uninitiated is a child and has therefore not been prepared and qualified for such roles, could be potentially dangerous. Since there are communities in Kenya that do not circumcise their youth, the belief in the rites of passage as a condition for eligibility for political leadership could be potentially discriminatory to non-circumcising communities if applied in national political leadership in Kenya.

That aside, initiation rites also often mark the beginning of the acquisition of that type of knowledge often made inaccessible to the uninitiated. The rites are, therefore, of great educational significance. They open the door into the world of adult experience and the mysteries of life. They enable the youths to learn the values of co-operation, endurance, courage, obedience, communal living, tolerance and the secrets and mysteries of man-woman sexual relationships.

**Benefits for the Present Education System**

What can the present system of education borrow from the initiation ceremonies presented above? A look at any curriculum would show that it contains three main components:

- (1) **content**,
- (2) **method** and
- (3) **intention**.
The content shows what is taught. The method shows how the content should be taught. The intention shows why that particular content and/or that particular method have been selected to achieve it. So, before any criticism can be leveled against a particular curriculum, it must first be evaluated along the three components to see whether it is educationally justifiable.

At the beginning of this paper, it was observed that initiation ceremonies have received a lot of criticism from those who have little idea about their educational value to the communities that continue to perform them. It is doubtful whether those criticizing the practice have ever cared to evaluate these rites of passage along the three criteria mentioned above so as to judge the extent to which they either succeed or fail to promote the development of the desirable qualities society would like to see in an individual.

Whatever other qualities a modern school graduate may be expected to have developed, they should surely include at least the following: a sense of belonging or social identity; a sense of responsibility; a sense of commitment to duty; a sense of co-operation with others; a strive towards self-reliance; a strong sense of tolerance; courage; endurance; obedience. The curriculum in the present school system has miserably failed to achieve this.

Yet, these qualities, which modern education has failed to achieve, are the main preoccupation of the rites of passage and are successfully achieved, as clearly seen in the lessons learnt during such educational activities as the performance of the ritual 'death and resurrection', the shedding of the blood and the concept of the 'covenant', the tending of the sacred fire and the ritual 'esuguta' grass, just to mention only a few.

Should the present education system wish to benefit from the success of the rites of passage in inculcating the desirable qualities in the individual, then it would perhaps borrow a leaf from the communities that practise these rites and examine the content, the method and the intention of these rites so as to discover why they achieve the goal.

One way of removing the controversy, especially as regards the rites of passage applied to girls, is perhaps by examining the intention, the goal, the community wants to achieve through these rites and then design an appropriate method of achieving that goal, within the guidelines of contemporary educational theory and practice. In a world that has become a small global village, the content contained in the teachings of the rites of passage would be modified so as to prepare the girl child for the roles she will be expected to perform as a member of the global village, not simply as one who is destined to live within the boundaries of her ethnic community which these rites seem to emphasize.

The valuable teachings in the rites concerning the sexual behaviour could be retained, especially now when the world is facing the threat of HIV/AIDS. But the painful ordeals directed towards the genitals during clitoridectomy should be modified to meet the requirements of contemporary educational theory and practice since it puts immense emphasis upon the respect for the learner. The teaching of obedience and other virtues contained in the instructions judiciously given during the seclusion period could be retained. But the teachings contained in the rites that require that she be subservient and perpetually dependent on the male members of society in decision making must be removed. In the now small global village where both male and female
freely intermingle, the cherished democratic principles do emphasize equality of opportunity among the sexes in all spheres of human life. To prepare the girl child for a life of conformity to blind obedience to ethnic community when in all practical purposes she will hardly live and work there is to fail to appreciate the fact that the world is now too small for such an education system. If anything, the girl is more likely to marry and live outside her ethnic community as modern education sends her away from home to interact with people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds.
Notes and References


50 Mircea, Eliade., *op. cit.*., pp 23.

60 Monyenye, S., *op. cit.*., pp 266.

70 Ibid. pp 269.


90 LeVine. *loco. cit.*